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WASHINGTON POST

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

Cambodian Is Key to Nixon Strategy

By Jack Anderson

The success of President Nixon's strategy in Indochina depends heavily upon Cambodia's ailing, erratic President Lon Nol, who is now regarded in Washington as the best bet against a Communist takeover.

If Cambodia should fall under Communist control, South Vietnam would become highly vulnerable to Communist infiltration, isolation and eventual overthrow.

Yet only a few months ago, Washington wanted Lon Nol replaced by a more stable leader. The Central Intelligence Agency quoted prominent palace sources as saying the Cambodian chief executive had suffered a serious stroke and had taken "leave of his senses."

A CIA source used the French phrase, "etre desempare," to describe Lon Nol's mental instability. Another source told the CIA that Sirik Matak, a power in Phnom Penh, had confided sorrowfully that "Lon Nol is a sick man, both physically and mentally," and that "his intellectual processes no longer function as they once did."

In another secret dispatch from Phnom Penh, the CIA reported that "the Cabinet has discussed ways and means of easing (Lon Nol) out of the day to day conduct of government business." Later three of his most powerful associates, according to the CIA, urged him to give up the presidency and accept the ceremonial post of chief of state immediately. Sirik Matak added that a new constitution could be promulgated quickly and it would be assured that Lon Nol would continue as chief of state.

"Lon Nol," reported the CIA, "replied that he did not intend to be chief of state at this time (but) . . . that he would be prime minister and head of government under the new constitution as under the old."

The policy makers in Washington privately hoped that Sirik Matak, himself, an able administrator, would take over the helm and that Lon Nol could be persuaded to come to America for therapy. But no longer. Lon Nol has now regained the use of some of his paralyzed limbs and has sharpened mentally although he still isn't the strong, vigorous leader he was before his stroke.

But Washington considers him the "cementing factor" who can best hold the shaky Cambodian government together and resist Communist encroachment. The prospects are poor for a Cambodian cease-fire such as have been signed in Vietnam and Laos. President Nixon is anxious, meanwhile, to see the Lon Nol regime remain in power. For the Joint Chiefs have warned that if the Communists grab Cambodia, reopen its port to military shipments and turn the country into a base for guerrilla operations against South Vietnam, the Saigon regime could not survive.

The President dropped tons of bombs and gambled thousands of American lives to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. That is how Lon Nol suddenly has become a key man in the President's Indochina strategy.

Footnote: The bombing of the presidential palace last weekend is believed by the CIA to have been a wild attempt by the pilot to assassinate Lon Nol, not a larger palace plot against him as some rumors out of Phnom Penh have hinted.

Maritime Spying

U.S. maritime officials don't talk about it, but they rely on espionage to compute subsidy payments to shipping companies.

The actual spying is done by a joint labor-management committee. The union furnishes the spies, and the shippers put up the money. Their secret mission is to sneak salary information off foreign ships.

This is needed by the government to calculate the difference between what foreign and American seamen are paid. Because foreign lines pay lower wages, the government makes up the difference so American ships can compete in the world maritime industry.

The foreign shippers, not eager to help their American competition, refuse to provide the payroll information voluntarily. So union undercover men slip aboard ships from England, Sweden, Brazil, Israel and elsewhere to buy the information.

The data from the individual ships is processed by the Labor-Management Maritime Committee, which turns it over to the Maritime Commission. Under this clandestine arrangement, the union collects a fee from management for its espionage, and management collects a subsidy from the government.

The Maritime Commission, of course, knows all about the espionage but pretends it doesn't.

Footnote: This spying for subsidies was organized largely by Joe Curran, who retired March 1 after more than 36 years as president of the National Maritime Union. His pension rights amount to a whopping $1 million. Dissident union members, however, won a temporary restraining order, which has kept the old labor leader from collecting his first payment. The dissidents have charged that Curran seldom worked during his last years as union chief but rather spent his time fishing off the Florida coast.